The Indian Pilgrimage of Martin Luther King, Jr.

By LAURINDA KEYS LONG

Only 12 years after Indians won their freedom with nonviolent protests, nonco-operation and boycott, African Americans were using the same tactics to overturn unjust laws.

Illustration by HEMANT BHATNAGAR. Source photographs © AP-WWP, Yoichi R. Okamoto, White House Press Office

By early 1959, Martin Luther King, Jr. had led the successful Montgomery boycott of buses and businesses in the southern U.S. state of Alabama. He, as well as his colleagues and followers, had been arrested, jailed, convicted, fined, threatened and beaten. And in 1956 they had celebrated the historic U.S. Supreme Court ruling that said laws allocating public resources on the basis of race are unconstitutional. Segregation was doomed, but not yet dead.

The newsreels, photographs and newspaper articles—about African Americans nonviolently resisting unjust laws, but refusing to cooperate with arbitrary rules that treated them as second-class citizens—were fascinating to Indians who only a dozen years earlier had won independence using similar tactics.

King was also making the connection. In a speech to the national convention of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in June 1956, he mentioned that through "soul force," Mohandas K. Gandhi "was able to free his people from the political domination, the economic exploitation and the humiliation that had been inflicted upon them by Britain."

The Montgomery boycott was carried out by black Americans to force the local authorities to rescind discriminatory laws. It was part of a widespread, multi-state, non-violent, church-based campaign that knocked a gaping gash in a hydra of law, tradition and prejudice that for almost two centuries had deprived African Americans of the rights of a citizen guaranteed by the Constitution.

There were many more boycotts, marches, sit-down protests, church meetings and prayer vigils, many families who fled their burning homes or sat up all night in fear, men and women and children who were beaten, spat upon. They were denied jobs, the right to vote, to walk down the street without being harassed, to go to a good school, use the public library, eat in a restaurant, sit on a park bench, use a public restroom or get a drink of water.

The U.S. civil rights movement has obvious resonances in India, where the *Dalits* and people born into "lower castes" have lived for centuries under the same type of oppressions that were being faced by African Americans in the years since the Emancipation Proclamation of President Abraham Lincoln had ended slavery. Although they were full U.S. citizens, the African Americans, especially in the southern states, but elsewhere, also, often had to choose between being killed or harmed and putting up with humiliating treatment, illegal discrimination and deprivation of their rights. And even when the laws were changed, just as with the caste system—and other forms of discrimination around the world against people because of their appearance, race, family, name or tribe—it takes decades for the laws to be fully enforced. How long for the hearts of their would-be oppressors to change? Perhaps centuries.

HAROLD VALENTINE © AP-WWP

Above: Martin Luther King, Jr. (second row, left) with Reverends Ralph Abernathy (front row, left) and Glenn Smiley (second row, right) in an integrated Montgomery, Alabama bus after the Supreme Court ruled segregation unconstitutional on December 21, 1956.
Below left: The Kings at their Atlanta Georgia home on March 17, 1963 with children (from left) Martin III, Dexter and Yolanda. Their infant daughter, Bernice, is not shown.

King and his cohorts were realists. They knew how hard it was, how long it might take. Yet they were brave, patient, peaceable and—despite the horrors of lynching, house burnings and church bombings—hopeful, optimistic, determined and full of faith. That faith rings forth in King's speech in Washington, D.C. on August 28, 1963. "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character," he said. Implied in that articulated dream is that there would be, some year, an African American president. King is unlikely to have visualized Barack Obama. His father a Kenyan, his mother a white American, Obama was six years old and living in Indonesia at the time of King's death. Yet he became president 40 years later, within the lifetime of King's children.

GENE HERRICK © AP-WWP

Back in 1959, however, some people dreamed that King himself might become the first African American president. His oratorical talents, leadership abilities, strategic planning, courage and amiableness made him a man of interest to the ordinary and the great across the world. One of these was Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of India.

During a short visit to the United States in 1956, Nehru said he wished he had met King. Indian representatives followed up, as did former U.S. Ambassador to India Chester Bowles, to bring about a journey

Resources: *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by Clayborne Carson; *Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Tour of India in 1959*, from the Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University; *With the Kings in India*, Gandhi National Memorial Fund, articles by James E. Bristol and Swami Vishwananda, *Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr*, by Mary King.

© APWWP

Above: A policeman leads away Abernathy (left) and King from a demonstration they organized against continued discrimination by businesses in Birmingham, Alabama, on April 12, 1963.

Below: King receives a kiss from his wife, Coretta, after leaving the Montgomery Courthouse, where he was found guilty on March 22, 1956 of conspiracy to boycott city buses. The judge suspended his fine while the case was appealed.

GENE HERRICK © APWWP

to India for King.

"While the Montgomery boycott was going on, India's Gandhi was the guiding light of our technique of nonviolent social change. So as soon as our victory over bus segregation was won, some of my friends said: 'Why don't you go to India and see for yourself what the Mahatma, whom you so admire, has wrought?'" King said, according to *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by Clayborne Carson of Stanford University in California.

R.SATAKOPAN © APWWP

The Kings were garlanded upon arrival in New Delhi on February 10, 1959.

© APWWP

The Kings spent March 9, 1959, their last Indian evening, at the home of Acharya J.B. Kripalani, an interpreter of Gandhi's teachings (third from left). Others are (from left) Kripalani's secretary, Shanti; Barbara Bristol and James E. Bristol of the Quaker Centre.

Photographs courtesy GANDHI SMARAK NIDHI/NATIONAL GANDHI MUSEUM

The Kings and Lawrence Reddick, in prayer at the Gandhi memorial in New Delhi.

In the end, King, his wife, Coretta, and Alabama State College professor Lawrence D. Reddick, King's biographer, spent just under a month in India. Because of flight problems, they landed on February 9, 1959, in Bombay, spent the night at the Taj Mahal Hotel and flew the next day to Palam Air Base in New Delhi, two days late.

One could say, however, that the scene had been set years before, when King, as a teenage student at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, was mentored by the principal, Benjamin Elijah Mays and first read the writings of Gandhi. Mays had "returned from India as one of the growing number of African American disciples of Mahatma Gandhi" and became one of the great influences on King's life, H.V. Shivadas of the Gandhi Foundation of USA has written.

According to King, Reddick had told him at the outset of the India trip "…my true test would come when the people who knew Gandhi looked me over and passed judgment upon me and the Montgomery movement." He described the ensuing, so-called hurricane tour as "one of the most concentrated and eye-opening experiences of our lives."

He spoke to thousands, was greeted by name as he walked the streets or traveled in trains, planes and cars, was besieged for autographs, welcomed into the poorest village homes and the most palatial. He said that his wife "ended up singing as much as I lectured."

The American Friends Service Committee (or Quakers, a pacifist Christian denomination) co-sponsored the trip, along with the Gandhi National Memorial Fund. James E. Bristol, director of the Quaker Centre in New Delhi, acted as guide throughout the journey. The Indian government did not host the visit, but Nehru sent a welcoming note and had dinner with King on his second night in India. The prime minister had scheduled a dinner for the Kings the night before. But because of the delayed landing (due to fog!), in an amazing move that must have sent the protocol-checkers into a tizzy, the prime minister had them for dinner the next night.

So February 10 was spent in greetings, garlanding and interactions with reporters to whom King commented, "To other countries I may go as a tourist, but to India I come as a pilgrim." From the accounts we have, the evening dinner was a fascinating four hours, as King and Nehru had fundamental differences on important issues of their day, which humanity is still disagreeing over today.

The vast number of India's poor struck King, just as it does visitors these days when they see it for the first time. "Most of the people were poor and poorly dressed. In the city of Bombay, for example, over a half million people—mostly unattached, unemployed, or partially employed males—slept out of doors every night," King said in recalling his visit later. The Kings saw these scenes as they were being driven from the airport to the luxury hotel on their first night in India. "The sight of emaciated human beings wearing only a dirty loincloth, picking through garbage cans, both angered and depressed my husband," Coretta Scott King said in her memoir. "Never, even in Africa, had we seen such abject, despairing poverty."

Even earlier, King was concerned, having visited Africa, about the questions facing emerging, post-colonial governments on how to use resources: should they follow Western capitalism, socialism, Soviet-inspired centrism, encourage natural crafts and professions or build huge factories.

The issue of developing countries, in particular, using precious national wealth to build up armies and buy weapons was on King's mind. At his final news conference in New Delhi on March 9, he called on India to set an example to the world by unilaterally disarming. "It may be that just as India had to take the lead and show the world that national independence could be achieved nonviolently, so India may have to take the lead and call for universal disarmament, and if no other nation will join her immediately, India should declare itself for disarmament unilaterally. Such an act of courage would be a great demonstration of the spirit of the Mahatma and would be the greatest stimulus to the rest of the world to do likewise," King said. The suggestion, though echoing Vinoba Bhave, seems as astounding in its context as the one made by Gandhi after the start of World War II in open letters to the British and the Jewish people, advising them not to fight, even to the point of allowing themselves to be conquered, exiled or killed. King did not go so far; he said passive resistance should not be confused with non-resistance.

King could not have known, as he engaged the prime minister in discussion on the evening of February 10, 1959, "that India's ambitious nuclear power program (which was then consuming a third of the nation's research budget) could someday produce nuclear weapons" Carson, founding director of Stanford's Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, wrote in a recent article for the *Times of India*.

Just days before he set out for India, King had addressed the War Resisters League in New York, saying, "What will be the ultimate value of having established social justice in a context where all people, Negro and White, are merely free to face destruction by Strontium 90 [radiation] or atomic war?"

"He probably realized at that time that this was not Nehru's viewpoint when he had dinner with Nehru," Carson told SPAN in an interview. "We know now that India had already started its atomic program; it saw the threat of China. That's one of the things where, by the end of the trip King had become more Gandhian than many of Gandhi's former colleagues. I think he came to India to learn more about Gandhi's ideas, and by the time he left India, he was the pre-eminent Gandhian."

In fact, Reddick wrote in his account of the trip, *With King through India*, that Nehru had acknowledged, "as an individual and a follower of Gandhi he favored nonviolent resistance in every phase of life—between persons, groups and nations; but as a head of state, in a world that had not accepted the nonviolent principle, it would be folly for one country to go very far down that road alone."

For more information:

Washington, D.C. speech
http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihaveadream.htm
Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute
http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/
The King Center
http://www.thekingcenter.org/

In commenting on this, Carson could immediately think of only one other country that has done so, Costa Rica. "I think nonviolence is one of those ideas that everyone kind of believes in for the other person, but it's hard to accept for oneself, particularly if we believe we have something of value that other people want," says Carson.

"I think he left India on the road to the Nobel Peace Prize because he had become by that time an international figure and international symbol of the greatest freedom struggle the world has ever known, the struggle of the 20th century to bring basic rights to the majority of the world's people," Carson says of King. "He and Gandhi are the primary symbols of that. Gandhi was assassinated; King was left to carry on that mantle of the preeminent global symbol of the constructive solution to the central problem of the century."

Photographs courtesy GANDHI SMARAK NIDHI/NATIONAL GANDHI MUSEUM

According to the *Autobiography,* a compilation of King's writings, conversations and speeches edited by Carson, King's impression was that India was divided between those who wanted it "to become Westernized and modernized as quickly as possible" to raise the standard of living, and those who felt Westernization would "bring the evils of materialism, cutthroat competition and rugged individualism," causing India to "lose her soul."

King felt that Nehru was trying to "steer a middle course between these extreme attitudes." King recalled that in their talk, Nehru felt "there were some things that only big or heavy industry could do for the country" and that the

The Kings met (photos top to bottom) Indian President Rajendra Prasad, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and a longtime Gandhian, Amrit Kaur, soon after their arrival.

Photographs HEMANT BHATNAGAR

The U.S. Department of State is supporting celebrations across India to commemorate the tour that Martin Luther King, Jr. made 50 years ago to study the ideas and meet the followers of Mohandas K. Gandhi. What he experienced deeply influenced the American civil rights movement. A delegation including Martin Luther King, III; civil rights movement veteran Representative John Lewis; and jazz musician Herbie Hancock, along with other distinguished Americans, planned meetings with counterparts in India to underscore the enduring importance of the King and Gandhi legacies. The visitors hoped to travel to some of the principal sites associated with Gandhi's work, just as King, and his wife, Coretta, did from February 9 to March 10, 1959.

One of the first events in the series of commemorations this year was a January 15, candle-lit gathering at the Gandhi-King Memorial Plaza at New Delhi's India International Center. With support from the American Center, the Gandhi Peace Foundation, the Working Group on Alternative Strategies and others, about 60 people enjoyed songs, interaction, and remembrances. They ended the evening by holding hands and singing "We Shall Overcome," the hymn of the American civil rights movement. Children singers from the Touch a Chord organization, a choir from the Leprosy Mission of India and musically talented American diplomats performed inspirational songs.

Coretta Scott King with Indian women.

G. Ramachandran, secretary of the Gandhi National Memorial Fund, sponsors of the Kings' visit to India, presents a gift of books.

King at the Quaker Centre, which sponsored his visit.

Photographs courtesy GANDHI SMARAK NIDHI/NATIONAL GANDHI MUSEUM

state's watchful eye could prevent pitfalls. At the same time, Nehru supported the expansion of weaving, spinning and other home and village handicrafts to "leave as much economic self-help and autonomy as possible to the local community."

The subject of this 50-year-old discourse is still relevant today.

The talk also touched on what Nehru described as India's efforts to eliminate caste discrimination, including the policy of giving preference to *Dalits* in university admissions, an idea that was hotly controversial when it was later applied to African Americans in the United States, and stirs mixed feelings in India, also. "This is our way of atoning for the centuries of injustices we have inflicted upon these people," Nehru had explained. The same basis was used when the similar method, called "affirmative action," was adopted in the United States.

King described himself as delighted that Indian leaders had "placed their moral power" behind laws aimed at ending discrimination against *Dalits*. His enthusiasm when he returned home and talked of these things may have been overly rosy, almost as if he believed the laws and the government's support were on their way to eliminating caste discrimination very soon. He praised the village projects he saw that were aimed at helping lower castes, but he may have been surprised at how entrenched it remains 50 years later, comments Henry Thiagaraj, author of *Human Rights from the Dalit Perspective*, brought out a year ago by Gyan Publishing House.

"The treatment of American Blacks in the 1960s, the violence inflicted on them and their suffering, is comparable with the treatment of Untouchables," Thiagaraj tells SPAN. "Untouchability, in my opinion and study has the origin in racism, although the distinctive feature in India is that is has acquired a religious sanction." Giving one example of the similarities, Thiagaraj mentioned segregation of dwelling places, with Indian villages divided into sections so that *Dalits* live separately from caste Hindus. Thiagaraj argues this is exactly what African Americans faced, until U.S. laws were passed, and enforced, that prohibited refusing to sell or rent housing to someone based on their race. Other similarities he cites: "*Dalit* children are asked to sit separately, play separately and prohibited from drinking water from the same tap as caste Hindu children. Laws and safeguards are not enforced in rural areas, where landowners maintain their age-old discriminatory social customs, violations of which are punished by lynchings." King and other African Americans of his time would have found such a description almost identical to their way of life in the southern states. Well into the 1960s, and in some places later, signs appeared over public drinking taps and toilets designating them for "Whites" or "Coloreds" in the American South.

In fact, one of the moving stories King told about his trip to India showed how clearly and forcefully this similarity had been brought home to him. It was when the principal of a school for the children of former *Dalits* introduced him as "a fellow Untouchable from the United States of America." Six years later, as King told an American church congregation about this, he said, "For a moment I was a bit shocked and peeved that I would be referred to as an Untouchable."

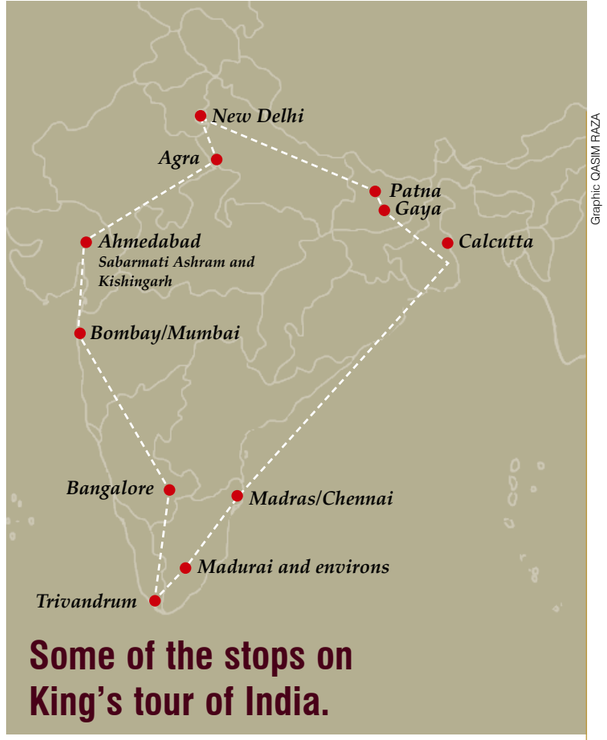
Then, he says, he started thinking: About the fact that 20 million of his fellow black Americans "were still, by and large, in rat-infested, unendurable slums in the big cities of our nation, still attending inadequate schools faced with improper recreational facilities." And he said to himself, "Yes, I am an Untouchable, and every Negro in the United States is an Untouchable."

King was moved when he visited small villages and saw hundreds of people sleeping on the ground, or living in little huts shared with cows and chickens, with no water for washing. "Pretty soon we discovered that these people were the Untouchables," he said, according to the *Autobiography*. "These were the people who worked hardest, and they were trampled over, even by the Indians themselves. Gandhi looked at this system and he couldn't stand it. ...And he decided that he would speak against it and stand up against it the rest of his life." King told of Gandhi's adoption of an Untouchable as his daughter, against his wife's wishes, and of his fasting until Untouchables were allowed into Hindu temples. "He demonstrated in his own life that untouchability had to go," King said.

The continuing existence of casteism and racism 50 years later should not produce despair, but illustrate the need, now more than ever, for "shining examples of individuals who reach across difference for the sake of a common goal, a common good," comments Eboo Patel, executive director of the Interfaith Youth Core, based in Chicago, Illinois. "We may not have achieved it yet, but King understood that 'the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.' Neither King nor Gandhi knew the fruits that their labor would produce following both of their assassinations," Patel tells SPAN. "But still their lives illuminate the pathway to justice today."

The Kings saw a good deal of India. They got used to rising early in the morning to make connections, nevertheless arriving late, sometimes eating from banana leaves, cross-legged on the ground, walking through villages, interacting with students and academics, taking a swim in Kerala, viewing the Taj Mahal, enjoying the cultural richness of Gaya and Shantiniketan, and watching the sun set and the moon rise at the same time off Cape Cormorin on India's southern tip. The beauty of that scene, with two heavenly lights shining, affected King so profoundly that he later used it in a sermon.

His pilgrimage would not have been complete, however, without passing time at Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, which Gandhi founded upon his return to India from South Africa, and where he had lived for 18 years, "working out his way for the freedom of the country and the new social order," as Swami Vishwananda put it. He described his travels with the Kings in a very descriptive and personalized memoir published by the Gandhi National Memorial Fund. It was at the ashram, of course, that Gandhi's closest associates were trained for nonviolent action, where the march to the seashore began. "The Kings had a great experience going round the hallowed place and meeting in prayer the 600 or so inmates—most of them *Harijans*," wrote Vishwananda. "We came back much refreshed mentally and feeling grateful for the purity and the strength we had gained by the visit."



Graphic QASIM RAZA

Some of the stops on King's tour of India.

What King gained was evident, as he returned to the United States to live for a few more years, marching, preaching, calling, cajoling, walking toward the goal of an end to the evils of injustice and racialism that held back his country from its full potential.

To encourage the Freedom Marchers back home, King spoke about that March 1, 1959 day that he had spent at the ashram in Ahmedabad. He told how Gandhi had started the 322-kilometer walk to Dandi Beach with just a few people, and ended up with millions, all there to break the law by scooping up handfuls of sea salt. King told his listeners the story, in that compelling African American Gospel preaching rhythm that builds enthusiasm and sends a thrill down the spine:

"And Gandhi said to his people: 'If you are hit, don't hit back; even if they shoot at you, don't shoot back. If they curse you, don't curse back. Just keep moving. Some of us might have to die before we get there. Some of us might be thrown in jail before we get there, but let's just keep moving.' And they kept moving ..."

Below: Mohandas K. Gandhi, in white shawl, walking with others in New Delhi, in March 1936.
Right: Martin Luther King, Jr., in white cap, marching with others from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama in March 1965.

Photographs © AP-WWP

Please send your comments on this article to editorspan@state.gov